



County of Santa Cruz

Health Services Agency

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Mimi Hall, Health Services Agency Director

To: Santa Cruz City Council
Date: March 8, 2019
From: Arnold Leff, MD, Santa Cruz County Health Officer
Subject: Health Officer Advisory Regarding Highway 1/River Street Encampment

As you may know, I function as the city's legally authorized health officer and as such, this letter is to communicate my concerns about the public health implications of the Highway 1/River Street camp (the encampment). Current conditions at the encampment behind the Gateway Plaza shopping center are presenting significant public health risks to the encampment population and, by extension, the community at large.

California Health and Safety Code provides me with broad authority to issue enforceable orders designed to prevent epidemics and the spread of communicable diseases; however, given the situation as outlined below, I am hopeful that the Council will take immediate voluntary action to mitigate some of the public health issues at the encampment.

As you are aware, beginning in October 2018, an encampment formed behind the Gateway Plaza shopping center at the intersection of Highway One and River Street in the City of Santa Cruz. By December 2018, the size of the encampment led to problematic conditions that were a natural result of too many people living in a confined environment with limited access to hygiene and sanitation, which creates the opportunity for communicable diseases and other health risks to quickly surge.

During the week of January 7, 2019, the county's Health Services Agency (HSA) staff from the Homeless Persons Health Project (HPPH) health care clinic conducted a survey of the camp during two weekdays between the hours of 10 am and 2 pm, and county staff shared general findings and recommendations with City of Santa Cruz staff on January 15, 2019. At that time, HSA staff counted 134 tents, observed multiple occupancy in tents, and estimated a population of 175-200 people. Of 78 individuals completing most of a health survey, 16 people said they had chronic health conditions, 21 had physical disabilities, 48 said they had a Substance Use Disorder, 26 identified as having mental illness, and five reported as having developmental disabilities. Seven individuals identified being victims of domestic violence and 33 of those surveyed were patients or regular outreach clients of HPPH. At least 2 people at the camp were in wheel chairs. Clearly, the encampment population as a group is highly vulnerable to contracting and spreading communicable diseases due to their health status and living conditions.

HSA provided several recommendations to city staff and the city has worked collaboratively and proactively to address sanitation issues at the encampment, including providing portable toilets and handwashing stations in the ratio of 1:25 residents, allowing outreach services to enroll people in medical and other benefits, allowing placement of a kiosk for safe syringe disposal, and providing

regular disposal of trash and pallets to raise sleeping areas and belongings off the ground. However, despite these efforts to mitigate communicable disease risk, the crowded conditions of the encampment, coupled with lack of an appropriate sanitation infrastructure, create an environment conducive to the rapid spread of outbreaks such as norovirus, influenza, and Hepatitis A (such as the Hepatitis A outbreak in 2017 that led to over 75 reported cases in Santa Cruz County and one death). Although the county will be providing vaccinations to those willing and not immunized, the vaccinations will not prevent a potential significant outbreak of disease.

In addition to the above issues, the county's Mosquito Abatement and Vector Control (MAVC) Division recently performed an inspection of the encampment which confirmed evidence of an abnormal population of rodents (rats) at the encampment. This obviously compounds the already heavy health risks associated with the encampment since this rodent population carries communicable diseases that can be transmitted to those at the encampment (leptospirosis, typhus). The MAVC has called for immediate mitigation of the rodent population, and I strongly recommend that the City of Santa Cruz coordinate with CalTrans, which owns a portion of the land where the encampment is located, to implement an abatement program with a licensed pest control operator that utilizes Integrated Pest Management Practices, including rodent trapping and population monitoring. MVAC has offered to provide consultation and assistance to city and county partners to accomplish this recommendation.

I request that the City Council and administration immediately contract for dealing with the rodent population, allow the county to disseminate clean injection materials to those in the encampment who inject drugs, and make whatever arrangements are necessary for quickly decreasing the density at the encampment with the goal of ultimately closing it.

In closing, I want to emphasize that the encampment currently poses a significant public health risk to the individuals at the encampment as well as the general community and it should be permanently closed as soon as possible. I am available to speak with any member of the Council or your staff, or walk you through the encampment, in order to help you better understand the significant concerns identified in this letter. I thank you for your service to the community and for your serious consideration of the issues outlined above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Arnold S. Leff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Arnold" and last name "Leff" clearly legible.

Arnold Leff, M.D.
Health Officer
County of Santa Cruz

cc: Martin Bernal, City Manager
Tina Schull, Assistant City Manager
Carlos Palacios, CAO
Elissa Benson, Assistant CAO
Rayne Marr, Homeless Services Coordinator
Mimi Hall, HSA Director
Board of Supervisors